

A Message from the Fire Chief on the Current Budget Situation

As Chief of the Santa Barbara City Fire Department I want to provide the community with clear and accurate information regarding the budget balancing option which would reduce overtime for firefighters, in effect creating a temporary station closure or “brown out”. I want to assure everyone that public safety always has been, and will remain, my number one priority. Proposing reduction of emergency response staffing is something that I definitely don’t *want* to do, but rather something that I *have* to do. This proposal is one of a series of cost saving options from the fire department to deal with the current economic situation our city finds itself in. As a community, we pride ourselves in working towards sustainability; this is a proposal that maintains the highest level of public safety sustainable within our economic limitations.

The Current Status:

Our normal staffing for the fire department is 29 firefighters on duty every day of the year. We work three shifts; A, B, and C platoons that work 48 hours on duty and 96 hours off to staff 8 stations, including one at the airport. If you exclude the airport firefighters who are dedicated to aircraft rescue and firefighting, then we have 26 available firefighters in the city.

When a firefighter takes time off, which includes vacation, holiday, sick leave or injury time, we have found it to be cost effective to hire firefighters back at time and a half overtime, rather than have extra relief firefighters due to the cost of personnel benefits. Annually we budget \$1,289,000 to back fill positions to provide constant staffing levels. This figure does not include overtime for fires, special duties, or training. 87% (\$19 million) of the Fire Department’s \$21.5 million dollar budget is for wages and benefits of our department. The firefighters work hard and put their lives on the line for their wages every day. Despite this, the only way for fire staff to provide significant reductions in our operating budget is to look at reducing labor costs, and this is why this option is on the table.

The City of Santa Barbara has always strongly supported its fire department and we have an excellent standard of coverage with our current 7 stations and their distribution throughout the city. Our 7 station distribution system has been in place for over 50 years. We know that our average single engine response time is less than 3 minutes, which significantly beats the nationally recognized 4 -6 minutes standard. We are fortunate to have excellent automatic aid agreements with Santa Barbara County Fire and Montecito Fire. Santa Barbara County Fire Station 15 is located strategically at Mission Canyon and Foothill Roads, and able to provide coverage to the adjacent city neighborhoods.

Approximately 70% of our volume of calls is for medical emergencies, where one closest engine company will provide basic life support while American Medical Response, a private company, will provide advanced life support and ambulance transport. High risk structure fires, which require a minimum of 14 firefighters to respond on multiple apparatus, occur at a low frequency (4% of call volume) because of excellent building, safety codes, and an active fire prevention program. It is also important to remember that any given engine company may be away from their response district periodically; for training, move ups due to alarms, or administrative reasons. When this occurs, emergencies in that district are handled by the next closest fire engine. This kind of movement occurs on a daily basis and is necessary to facilitate fire department business.

The Proposed Budget Option:

Our overtime reduction plan would be to not hire for the first three firefighters who take leave. With more than three firefighters off, we would begin hiring overtimes.

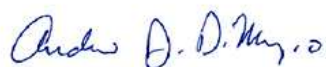
A staffing plan has been developed for the following conditions:

On Duty:	Station Staffing
26 firefighters	Full staffing of 7 stations (without including airport crew)
25 firefighters	Staff Station 3 with a Patrol unit and 2 firefighters to respond to medical emergencies
24 firefighters	Close Station 3, 1 firefighter assigned to augment the ladder truck
23 firefighters	6 stations staffed
22 firefighters	Resume overtime hiring to fill 6 stations

My goal is to implement this plan in a way to have the least impact to the community. We will work to make adjustments and improvements to the way we implement brown outs and the way we work with our mutual aid partners to ensure continued quality services.

The Challenge:

Having 7 municipal fire stations provides an exceptional level of fire and life safety for our city. This has been proven many times over. Current economic conditions are now challenging us to demonstrate with hard facts that this is the most efficient and cost effective model that is sustainable within our budget. Having one less station means there will be impacts to our response times. Will those impacts be acceptable and within national standards? I believe that standards can be met to a great percentage of time if we apply mitigations and work to keep our engines central to our city core. If we need to implement this option, we will continue to gather information and data from field experience to more thoroughly understand the impacts. This information would be analyzed quarterly and used to make changes to our response coverage as indicated. I am committed to developing a system for standards of coverage for Santa Barbara that will provide long term public safety guidelines for our community. Our fire managers are working in close collaboration with the Firefighters Association to confront this great challenge. I know that through this difficult process we will find new opportunities to improve our department, and continue to serve our community to the highest level possible.



Andrew J. DiMizio
Fire Chief